

## **BLOG.FOLIOS : Social Networking to Academic and Professional Engagement**

24<sup>th</sup> national conference on the beginning design student : atlanta, georgia : 13-15 march 2008  
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### **Embracing the Computer Generation**

Today's eighteen-year-old college freshman belong to a generation known variously as Generation Y, the Millennial Generation, the Computer Generation and the Internet Generation. Not only is this group the first to have grown up with digital technology as an integrated part of their lives, remarkably, most can not remember a time without computers. As such, members of this generation arrive on college campuses with a different way of seeing and experiencing the world, not to mention new ways of communicating and developing social relationships.

Members of Generation Y are characterized by their fascination with new technologies, their fluent use of the Internet for school work and leisure and their intolerance for delays, expecting service and quick responses through multiple modes of communication (i.e. telephone, email and in person). Moreover, as a result of their extreme familiarity with technology, unlike other generations they do not see its use as being novel, but rather a part of everyday life (Bender, 2008, Nayyar, 2001).

In their 2007 survey of 7,705 U.S. college students, Junco and Mastrodicasa reveal the pervasiveness of this generation's technological consumption. According to the survey 97% of the college students own a computer, 94% own a cell phone, 76% use Instant Messaging and 15% of IM users are logged on 24 hours a day/ 7 days a week. Additionally, 34% use websites as their primary source of news, 75% have a Facebook account and 60% own a portable music and/or video device.

As this survey suggests, a constant flux of information bombards Generation Y. Studies often point to ways in which this deluge of data leads to low attention spans and anxiety. However, if managed correctly, the generation's ability to multi-task can be a great attribute.

Design educators have the opportunity to embrace technological advances, thereby, focusing in on the strengths of this generation of students. Using online tools, e.g. blogs, that students are already proficient with to enhance their academic and professional engagement is the focus of this paper. During the fall of 2007, authors Buchanan and Lambeth required fifty-five first year interior architecture students develop a "blog.folio" to document their work during their first semester of study, with the intention that students would continue to maintain the blog throughout their nine semesters in the program, thus creating an ongoing record of their work and the accompanying dialog with instructors, peers

and other visitors to their sites. This paper documents the opportunities, challenges and mixed-reviews raised by this experiment.

## **Why Blog?**

In recent years blogs (also known as web logs or weblogs) have developed into one of the most popular personal publishing platforms on the internet. Unlike websites of the past, requiring extensive knowledge of HTML code and hours to build, blogs can be created and updated in a matter of minutes by anyone who can navigate to a web page and follow a quick tutorial (Brady 2007). Perhaps because of this instant gratification, Generation Y makes up a large percentage of the blogging population. According to Junco and Mastrodicasa's (2007) survey, 28 % of the college students questioned own a blog and 44% read blogs. These percentages grow daily as social networking sites, a favorite blogging outlet for many, continue to expand. According to eMarketer, in 2011 the number of United States social networking sites will top 105 million, nearly double the 60 million of 2007. eMarketer Debra Williamson describes this online phenomenon, stating "this is how young people communicate with each other, how they get information and express themselves (Barlas, 2007). While this data sheds light on the popularity of blogging, the question must be raised of why it makes sense as a tool for design educators.

## **Opportunities**

### **portfolio development**

Design education is based on an iterative critique/analysis methodology. The development of a body of work vetted through this process remains a vital part of any design student's diploma work. As department chair, Lambeth tells prospective students and their parents that there are three things that will aid them in gaining their first job: a strong portfolio, good communication skills (interview) and luck. Of these factors, the portfolio ranks as most important. Bender (2008) writes that a student's "portfolio is the single most important record of [one's] design education and professional experience" (p. xiii).

Developing a strong portfolio often becomes a struggle for design students as most do not take steps to document their work immediately upon finishing a project and much of the three dimensional and paper work deteriorates over time. Consequently, many upper-level design students find themselves confronted with the task of assembling a portfolio of various projects that have been executed yet not documented over the period of four years.

This context leads to the importance of helping students develop habits of thoroughly documenting their work early in their college career. Learning to effectively photograph or scan work, design the blog.folio, combine text and graphics, and to record observations and inspirations all contribute to students'

skill sets. The sooner students begin to take their work seriously the more rapidly they develop professional attitudes.

### **sweet critique**

Critiquing of design work is an integral, though often uncomfortable, aspect of the design process. It is vital that beginning students learn the skills of providing and receiving criticism early on. Many beginning students tend to “hide” their work to avoid critique, mainly because they are sensitive to critique, i.e. critique feels like criticism in a personal way. Critiquing via the comments section of the blog.folio takes the immediate sting out of the critique, thereby encouraging students to be more straightforward in their critiques.

This critique worked especially well when facilitated by the instructors. For instance, periodically throughout the semester Buchanan asked her Design Visualization students to comment on five of their classmates drawings via the blog. While difficult to monitor, most students appeared to excel in this area. Those who received significant feedback went on to give return feedback to their peers throughout the semester. However, the majority failed to provide feedback unless prompted to do so.

### **precedent study**

Precedent analysis remains a vital part of the design process as it is imperative that students be exposed to the work of experts in their field. Only in understanding the context of the body of design knowledge can a student mature into a thoughtful, informed designer. Awareness of trends and their relationship to precedents of the past also provides a strong framework for creating works of design for the present and future.

This type of study is easily cultivated through blogging. During the fall of 2007, Buchanan and Lambeth required their first year students to research 10 buildings, 10 design firms, 10 designers, 10 graphic designs, 10 interior environments, 10 products and artifacts and 2 new technologies that they found inspiring. Students were required to create posts documenting their findings including images, text and applicable links and citations. While this same assignment could have occurred on paper, the blog allowed for easy formatting and the beginnings of an online “inspiration network.” Furthermore, as they grew accustomed to blogging, students began linking to precedents for future reference on their own, without the push from instructors.

### **body of work**

Undoubtedly, one of the greatest strengths to arise from using blog.folios within the design curriculum is that students are encouraged to assume a mature approach to their work. Traditionally, little emphasis is placed on documenting a beginning designer's projects and students are reluctant to take the initiative to do so on their own. By requiring students to document their work on their blog.folios in the beginning years, students get used to the process and continue

to do so throughout their career. Moreover, when the blog.folios are introduced by instructors as a digital portfolio, students assume a professional attitude toward the system. Rather than documenting individual projects, students become concerned with showing their “body of work.” As such, process images, often lost in final presentations, are valued and recorded.

### **new skills**

Making and materiality have long been foundational aspects of design programs, as well as that of the physical environment. Digital imaging, modeling and communication are new technological skills that students must also master. The advancement of digital media in the design professions continues to expand into all areas of project development and management, as well as professional practice administration. Portfolios for both prospective employees and professional firms are produced digitally first, even if later printed out on paper. Recording and documenting of design work is done with digital cameras, scanners and computers. No longer can these essential skills be reserved for the advanced student, but rather should be integrated from the beginning.

In learning to properly document their work for the blog.folios, students were given workshops in photography, lighting, scanning and digital manipulation. These skills, typically learned later in a students’ career, encouraged students to take great care when recording their projects.

### **team teaching**

One of the struggles of team teaching is finding a convenient time for all members of the team to meet to review student work and grade. The blog.folios allow teaching teams to view a student’s work both as a group and individually, thus accommodating a busy academic schedule.

### **accreditation**

The use of blogs as records of student work also provides great assistance in compiling records of student design work for accreditation purposes. The accreditation process includes a site visit with an exhaustive exhibit of student work. Collecting and displaying student work raises many challenges. It is anticipated that blog.folios will help in this way.

### **it’s electric!**

One unforeseen opportunity that quickly arose from the blog.folio experiment was the creation of new blogs. Once familiar with how the system works, students began maintaining blogs for group projects as a way to easily disseminate information. These blogs were often used for interim presentation purposes as they were present and served the same purpose as more time-consuming programs such as Powerpoint.

### **Challenges**

As was to be expected, in addition to opportunities, the implementation of blog.folios in the classroom has presented a number of challenges

### **time**

Design programs are characterized by their intensity. Maintaining a blog adds a significant time commitment to a students' already heavy workload. This, compounded by restrictions to computer lab access and limited numbers of cameras and scanners, often result in even the most dedicated of students falling behind in documentation of their work. Sufficient class time should be allotted for documentation and steps should be taken to provide an additional computer station with a scanner outside the computer lab and within the studio.

### **quality appraisal**

A large emphasis within the beginning design curriculum is on craft. Unlike previous generations who have grown up in an environment of "making things" (from model cars to tree houses), today's Generation Y student may have little experience in this area. As a result, it is imperative that students be critiqued on the level of detail with which they put something together –whether it be a chipboard model or a drafted axonometric. However, due to the restrictions in the sizes of photos that can be uploaded and formatted to fit a blog, it is difficult to adequately gauge this quality via the computer screen. Likewise, poor scans, blurry posts and overzealous digital manipulation can compound this issue. Moreover, many 3-dimensional projects simply do not translate well to 2-dimensional photographs. In all cases, nothing compares to seeing (and holding) a project in person.

### **organization**

One of the characteristics that sets a blog apart from another type of website is its chronological order. While this organization works well when evaluating a student's most recent work, it makes grading of older work somewhat tedious and, at other times, difficult. For instance, large projects can easily become separated on multiple pages or divided by extraneous posts. In addition, each student's blog.folio serves as a place to store work from all their Interior Architecture classes, making organization an even greater challenge. This issue can be partially solved with the use of tags or labels, however, it would be helpful if it was possible to further subdivide blogs to include categories within categories (i.e. IAR 101 : Projects : "A Place for an Egg").

### **continuity**

For the blog.folio experiment to work most effectively overtime, it is important for students to maintain the websites throughout their education. This means faculty teaching subsequent classes must promote and require the use of blog.folios. This is a challenge as professors within the department have different teaching pedagogies and comfort levels with the new technologies. This issue might be lessened with an introduction to the blogging interface at a faculty meeting prior to the beginning of the school year.

## **Mixed Reviews**

### **going public**

In most cases as soon as something is posted to a blog it can easily be accessed by anyone using the Internet. This offers both advantages and disadvantages for students. It is positive in the sense that this exposure encourages students to create professional posts, and negative in the cases where they are not proud of their work and fear others (i.e. potential employers, peers) seeing it. From a teaching standpoint, this is a way to encourage students to do their best work at all times.

Additionally, there are risks associated with blogging similar to those often associated with other forms of social networking (i.e. invasion of privacy, sharing of too much information, etc.) By encouraging students to think of their blog as a professional representation of themselves (one they would point a potential employer to) Buchanan and Lambeth hope to eliminate this concern.

### **spelling and grammar**

Writing abilities vary greatly among students. While the repetition of writing about one's work via blogs can improve a student's skills, it can also highlight their inadequacies. Attention must be focused on observation, description and analysis in writing assignments to help hone abilities. Moreover, allowing students to write about design topics of their own choosing which interest them often results in better writing.

## **Conclusion**

The generational characteristics of today's freshman student, coupled with the advent of new digital technologies and networking capabilities, signify new ways of thinking about information access and relational systems in members of Generation Y. Currently these new ways of thinking have importance to educators while this generation is in college, but when they become primary wage earners and purveyors of home and work environments, their influence will extend even more so to designed environments and products.

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